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Caregiver Occupational Stress Control: The Basics

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Naval Hospital Okinawa Caregiver Occupational Stress Control program team take a coffee and cool class (James Jason)

Greetings from Okinawa, Japan. I am here today to talk about an idea I am sure we can all get behind: shipmates looking out for shipmates. One way we look out for our shipmates here at U.S. Naval Hospital Okinawa (USNHO) is through Caregiver Occupational Stress Control (CgOSC). The reason this concept is so important is because those who are suffering from stress injuries are often the last to know.

CgOSC is a comprehensive program that is designed to prevent the detrimental effects of both acute and chronic stress. Unmanaged or mismanaged stress can invariably lead to staff and unit burnout, compassion fatigue, interpersonal problems, impaired patient-staff interactions and decreased productivity. The efforts of CgOSC are intended to preserve and enhance the psychological health of USNHO staff on their mission of providing quality

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family-centered healthcare. We accomplish this dynamic support of our caregivers through outreach programs, educational briefs, individual assessment, emergency management, referrals to appropriate resources and onsite unit support.

CgOSC is a flexible program that can be used to meet a variety of needs. For example, the CgOSC team was specifically tasked with supporting USNHO staff members during the massive transition to a newly constructed replacement facility in March 2013. Responding to the call, we launched a campaign to promote awareness of the untoward effects of prolonged stress exposure that can result in medical errors, job dissatisfaction, and burnout. Through such venues as classes, briefings, posters, and social media, CgOSC trained our staff to recognize occupational stress injuries early, to intervene as peers, and to connect affected peers with clinical support services as needed.



CgOSC is an education and training model that is designed to enhance individual and unit stress management and is not a clinical mental health service. Appropriate referrals will be made to facilitate care for any staff members who may benefit from professional mental health treatment.

We are designed to collaborate with departments that are exhibiting signs and symptoms of stress. We attempt to identify group strengths in addition to areas that may need improvement. Tailored unit-based training would follow and may include relaxation training, team-building exercises or conflict-resolution skill-building.

Although shipmates looking out for shipmates is not a novel idea, we try to be novel in our approach by being creative and finding ways to have some fun now and then. We have employed the use of sumo suits, yoga instructors, musicians and even a massage therapist at hospital CgOSC events. One outreach program that we often employ is the "Coffee Break", where members of CgOSC team go out as a group to visit the staff of USNHO. The 10-15 minute break that our visit allows serves as a simple respite for the staff as well as a reminder that we care about our shipmates. During these "Coffee Break" visits, we frequently come across an individual who will say, "Hey, Shipmate... do you have a second?" That request for a "second" can come from a peer, a junior Sailor, someone senior, or even a colleague from another service. No matter who it is, we will break off from the group and provide the individual that "second" they requested. At times it is merely a simple inquiry, perhaps a 5-10 minute discussion that provides support or clarity and normalizes their stressful experience. It could be to schedule a time to sit down over a cup of coffee to just vent about occupational or life stressors. Other times it may be a request that warrants a more formal mental health intervention.

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Personnel from Naval Hospital Okinawa relieve stress while donning sumo suits. (Photos courtesy of Lt. Cmdr. Jason Duff)

All CgOSC team members know their comfort zone. They are trained to stay in their lane and identify when something has gone beyond the scope of buddy care. Training focuses on the facilitation of a self-referral or in some cases the direct escort of a shipmate to the chaplain or mental health services.

When stress is not mitigated, managed, or removed it can pull us away from previously effective means of managing our lives. Sometimes we all need reminders to focus on the positive aspects of our lives. We should all encourage our shipmates to stay connected (or re-connect) with the people, places and things that have supported them in the past.

We appreciate your attention to this important topic. Be sure to tune in next week for CgOSC Part 2: Membership & Training.

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